

Education in the Asia-Pacific Belt and What America Might Learn From It

An Honors Thesis (FCS 400)

By

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Abstract

Education is one of the main foundations of a modern society. It is how we pass on cultural values and prepare the nation's youth to become productive, intelligent citizens. American education has seen many changes in past 20 years, with the rise of charter schools to the passing of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Many within the education field see these changes as detrimental to the field as a whole, but solutions are difficult to come by. While America has been lagging behind in education, nations such as Australia and Malaysia are bringing test scores up and driving greater numbers of students into higher education. Meanwhile, nations such as Thailand fall even further than the United States in terms of educational success. Investigative research, looking into each nation's educational standards, teacher ethics guidelines and policies, budget allocations, and major recent educational reforms, has been compiled, in order to determine potential solutions to some of the major issues within the American system of education.

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In both the past and present, the United States of America has been one of the best countries to live in for a quality education. America has maintained a very high literacy rating over the years and a large number of college graduates from both the nation's population and from foreign students. But in the past decade, we have seen major changes in what some might call the quality of our education system. In 2009, America ranked 18th out of 36 developed nations in terms of high school graduation rate. Where we had 30% of the world's college students in the '70s, we now have less than half of that number (Jerald, 2009). Major reforms such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the Common Core State Standards Initiative have made great impacts on how teachers in America do their jobs. The increasing prevalence of standardized testing, combined with these reforms, has left opinions greatly divided over how education should be handled. Some feel that the reforms take creative power away from the teachers, forcing them to adhere to guidelines that limit what they can do with their classrooms. Others feel that these reforms even the playing field for all the students and makes it easier for the government and the school systems to track educational success. Both sides have valid opinions and that makes it difficult to determine how we as a nation should proceed.

In circumstances such as these, it may be appropriate to observe some of the other nations of the world, particularly those with a good track record for education, and gain an understanding of how their education systems work. From there, I tried to determine what aspects could potentially work for the American system and how these might need to be altered to be properly integrated into the current framework. When it came to

selecting the countries that would be studied, a few criteria had to be kept in mind. The nations had to have an organized central government with the ability to properly affect and enforce educational policies and good literacy rates (>80%). Possessing a good relationship with organizations such as UNICEF or UNESCO also aided in the choosing of the subject nations. In the end, I decided to focus on the nations of Thailand, Malaysia, and Australia for potential ideas on how to change American education policy for the better. Malaysia and Australia are excellent candidates for a variety of reasons. Both nations education systems have a similar basis in the British system, where American education found its start as well, yet have evolved over time into distinct stratagems that have been recognized as some of the more successful education systems in the world. With Malaysian culture's diversity, it offers a variety of ideas that are intrinsically designed to fit a wide range of beliefs and ideals. Also, in recent years, Malaysia has put forth a series of blueprints and reforms to change its education system, which aim to boost graduation rates of students looking for careers that may hold a greater impact in the near future (Ministry of Education 2013). Thailand is something of an odd-man-out, with nothing that is very notable, but may prove useful for ideas that deal primarily with minority students within the United States. But before any major ideas are put forth, we have to have something of a set definition of "a system of education," standards we can apply to each system, and what sort of skills and knowledge are going to be necessary for that education to have any sort of impact on the students' lives in today's world.

What is Education?

A system of education can be a very loose term to define in many cases. Some definitions would focus more on the bureaucratic side of the teaching; the parts run from federal buildings and government offices. Other definitions might place more emphasis on the practical side of teaching; where the actual learning takes place and where teachers and students interact with one another. For the purposes of this study, we will be using a definition that focuses on both of these options. In the terms of this study, a system of education is a series of government rules and guidelines that determine how a formal education is to be carried out within the boundaries of the nation controlled by said government, supplemented by standards that both students and teachers must meet in order for the system to be considered effective in educating the students on how to properly function in both the modern forms of both the global and local society the students live in. For the system to qualify as a formal education, all major activities involved with learning must take place within the confines of a classroom setting, with instructors that meet state/national standards and are properly trained and qualified to instruct in their respective fields.

At this point we also have to properly judge the quality of the education each nation provides. Quality in education comprises a variety of factors both concrete and abstract, according to UNICEF. These factors include: healthy, active, and supported learners, safe environments, proper resources and facilities, relevant informational content for imparting both knowledge and basic skills, a set of procedures that teachers may follow to use the content in a classroom setting, and set goals for both teachers and students to reach during the teaching process. All of these factors have been subject to change over the years, to reflect the changing views and necessities of the cultures

providing the education. The systems that are more willing to embrace these changes have been shown to offer better quality educations (Colby, 2000).

One factor that has changed education across the world is the growing rate at which we develop new technologies. Information has become increasingly accessible over the past decade, with renovations in the Internet, social media, and wireless communication. All of these changes have led to major shifts in how the world looks. The world is getting smaller, and it has become easier for people separated by oceans to work and communicate with each other on a grand scale. Some skills have become less relevant in this age, while others have to be developed at an increasing rate with a different impact on the world than what they had before. For example, the increasing presence of automation has altered how many workplaces perform today. When someone mentions automation, one usually thinks of factories and robots on assembly lines. But computers have done even more just by doing the thinking for humans in workplaces not centered on labor. Where we once needed to directly interact with people at an airline, or a supermarket, or a phone company, we now have computers that automatically know how to respond to the consumer's requirements and requests. Instead of a workplace that needs a couple dozen people working at desks and counters all day, workplaces now can go with a half-dozen people trained to interact with customers while the computers take care of the routine work (Jerald, 2009). In short, the sort of skills an everyday job requires now involves less interaction with people and more interaction with computers.

Going back to the world getting smaller, as students get older and start to go off into the world, they are entering a world where globalization is a key part of society.

Globalization is the gradual breakdown of cultural and societal barriers between nations. This means that as time progresses, students and workers are increasingly likely to work, interact, and compete with/alongside students and workers from nations all over the world. As the world becomes smaller, the students have to be prepared to communicate with people that could potentially live in a society entirely different from the one they grew up in. Thus, students that have some understanding of foreign languages/cultures have become increasingly valuable (Jerald, 2009).

From here, we have to look at what students need to possess for the education to have paid off. Many people agree that the acquiring of a higher education has become even more of a necessity now, with automation replacing many of the lower paying jobs which have few requirements. If someone wants at least a middle-class lifestyle, a college education is his or her best shot. At the same time, the sort of knowledge that education needs to impart has evolved over time. While the old staples are still there (math, science, language arts), advanced mathematics, life sciences, and computer technologies have all become increasingly important in today's job market. Students are also being taught more on how to apply their knowledge in a "real world" situation, instead of simply memorizing information and filling in scan sheets. Critical thinking skills, communication skills, and adaptability are all traits that employers are looking out for in today's world (Jerald, 2009). All of this comes together to create a world focused more on the practical side of knowledge, where students are less likely to say things like, "When am I ever going to need to know this?"

In order for the quality of the education to be judged, there has to be something to judge it by. While standards on learning content are currently being debated in state

legislatures, many countries have set standards on how facilities are to be maintained, what students should be capable of at certain benchmarks, and how teachers are supposed to conduct themselves in a professional manner. These standards have multiple purposes, such as providing something of a middle ground between educational ideals and the realities educators have to deal with, creating a framework for assessing both the students and teachers, and providing clarity to the expectations that both the public and other education professionals have towards the effectiveness of the curriculum and the institutions. These standards can be determined by incorporating a number of facts and statistics, but in the end, they are typically set by the legislatures of the nation the education system is based in. Other times, they can be voted on and decided by major executives, such as in the United States circa 2002, where President Bush sat down the governors of all 50 states. At that meeting, they set forth six primary goals for national education. From there, the legislatures constructed the standards that would eventually become the No Child Left Behind Act, with strict restrictions and guidelines for education and a focus on the individual performance of each school (Hunter).

All of these factors, the system of education, the quality of education, and the educational standards, come together to build a framework on which we can properly judge the various pieces of a nation's educational system and determine how we work to affect a positive change in the American system. But before we can decide on the solutions, we have to know how the American education system works in its current form.

American Education

In America, most of the decisions regarding education are made at the state and local level. It is the states and communities that develop and fund educational institutions, draft the curriculum, and set the prerequisites for both graduation and enrollment into primary, secondary, and post-secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Just as well, much of the financing for education in America comes from state and local funds, both sources contributing around 44-45 percent of the total funds each. This leaves the federal government to pick up the remaining 10-12 percent of funding, which comes up at around an annual cost of around \$79 billion out of the federal government's pockets (about 13 percent of the annual budget back in 2011). The Title I Grants within the No Child Left Behind Act and the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) Special Education State Grants arrange large portions of these funds through the Department of Education (Atlas, 2015). Even though education takes up more than a tenth of the nation's federal budget and the Department of Education has ever growing responsibilities to the citizens of the United States, the Department of Education retains the smallest staff out of any other Cabinet-run federal agency (US Department of Education, 2012). This makes it difficult to properly keep up with all of the jobs and responsibilities the department has.

To counter this lack of staff at the federal level, each state has its own department of education, as well as set laws and regulations that make an entirely uniform system for the nation difficult to achieve. Each state has different laws on how to hire teachers, what sort of tests (standardized and otherwise) the students are required to take, how many years students have to be in school at the minimum, and how the funding for education is to be distributed. From there, the state level of education is divided even further into a

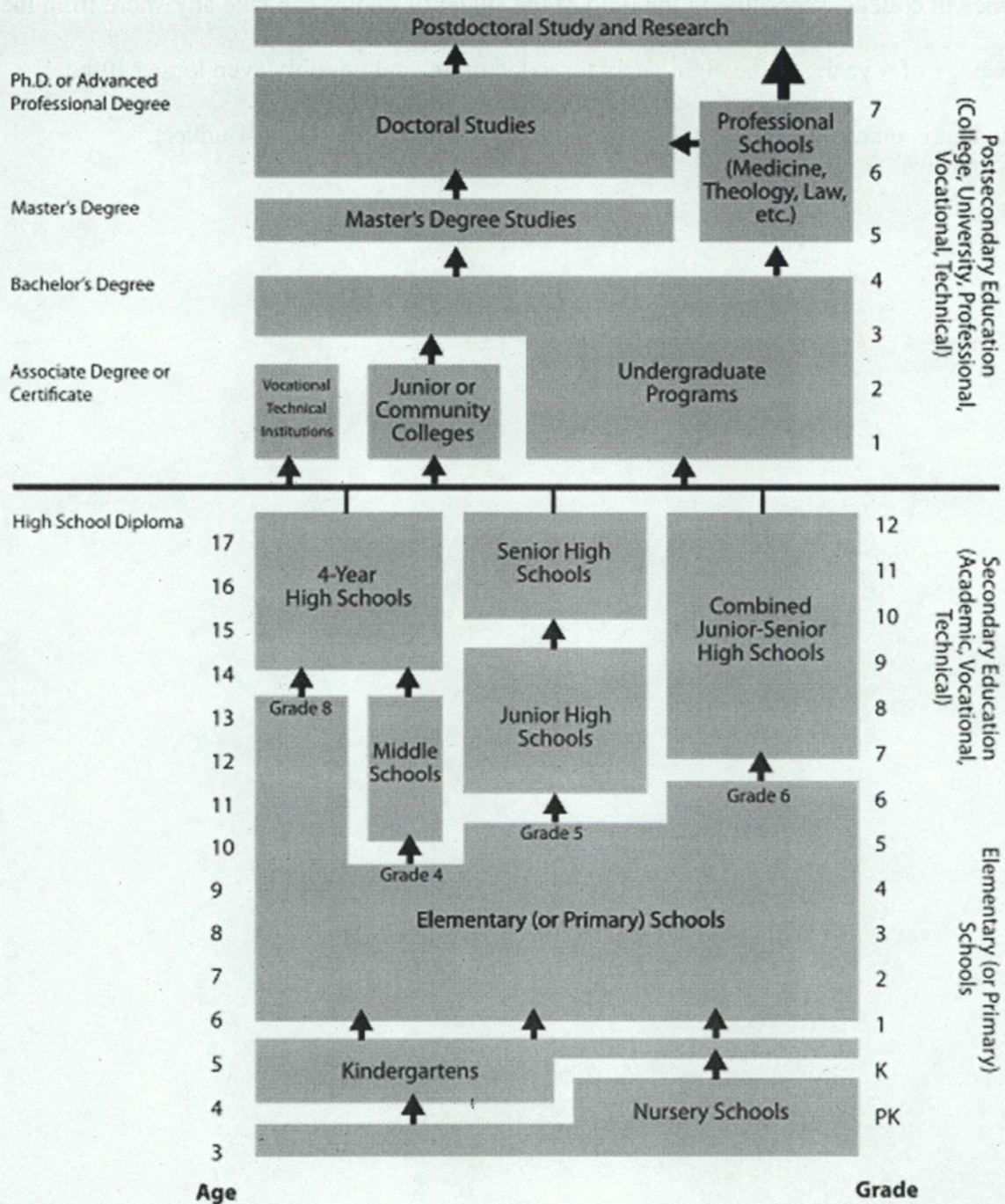
local level, which primarily decides on the curricula, the “educational needs of the community,” and how the teachers should interact with the students. Within the United States, education is heavily influenced by one’s location within the nation. What some schools in the Northeast teach, others may gloss over or leave out entirely in the Southwest and vice-versa. What is uniform across the United States seems somewhat basic. Education is separated into three levels (primary, secondary, and post-secondary). Formal education lasts a total of 12 years, though how long someone stays in the system depends on the limits of compulsory education within the state. Everyone has access to free public schooling, though private schooling (both religious and secular) is an option to those willing to pay tuition (Corsi-Bunker).

In the US, most students begin attending kindergarten at around the age of 5 and leaving high school usually at 18. In between those ages and depending on the school system the child attends, he/she can elementary, middle and high school, elementary and junior and senior high school, or just elementary and high school, with no middle ground. Students start off in a single classroom with a single teacher when they start elementary school. As they enter the middle school age, students begin moving from class to class, having some choice in the classes they take and mixing in with different students. Once they enter high school, the classes they take begin to be recorded on the basis of credits, with the students being required to attain a minimum number of credits in order to graduate from high school with a diploma. During their final (12th) year of secondary school, students are generally required to take either the S.A.T. or the A.C.T. exam, which are considered as benchmarks to determine a student’s readiness for college. With a diploma, students are allowed to enter postsecondary institutions, though many colleges

have extra requirements for students, such as S.A.T. test scores, A.P. credits, and maybe an entrance exam, so many students have to plan their college careers ahead of time.

Once in college, schooling in the field of the student's choice can take anywhere from the average of 4 years, to the eight years for a doctorate, and possibly even longer if the student is unaware of what he/she wants to do with their life (Corsi-Bunker).

A map of the US education system as a student experiences it, following both age and grade level. Source: <https://origins.osu.edu/article/58/maps>.



One of the major additions to America's education system in recent years is the bill passed in 2002 to update the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

passed by Lyndon B. Johnson in the '60s. This bill, known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), greatly increased the US government's role in judging student achievement and holding accountable the schools that had poor performance rates from students, while attempting to lower the achievement gap between students. At its most basic, the bill keeps the Title I grants from the ESEA in effect, allowing the government to continue funding public education. As an addition to the original bill, it expanded the government's role in education by having the Department of Education keep track of school performances and holding schools accountable for any failure to reach new standards that the bill enacted. It does this through requiring schools to test students' grades 3 through 8 in mathematics and reading/English-language arts skills. The results are organized into different subgroups, such as ESL (English-as-second language) learners, special education, low-income class, and racial minorities, and sent to the federal government for analysis (Klein, 2015).

Under the NCLB, states were required to bring all of their students up to a certain level of academic proficiency, the definition of which could be determined on a state-by-state basis. However, each school had to bring 100 percent of its students up to the proficiency level required by the state. This is referred to in the bill as "adequate yearly progress (AYP)." If the school's population, or even just one subgroup, does not make AYP two years or more in a row, then increasingly harsh sanctions can be placed on the school. At the start, schools become required to allow students to transfer to schools in the same district that are making AYP. After three years, free tutoring has to be offered. As more time passes, the state is required to intervene in the situation, making large decisions on behalf of the school. This can range from: shutting the school down,

personally taking over the school, sometimes turning it into a charter school, or firing large portions of staff and rehiring to fill the vacancies. As this goes on, Title I funding is set aside and even withheld as AYP is missed. This can make it difficult for the school to properly fix the issues it is facing, forcing the school to cut teachers, after-school activities, or programs that don't have any significant impact on national tests, such as the arts and physical education courses. At the same time, the bill requires that potential teachers have at least a bachelor's degree in their personal subject and certification from the state, though that was reduced in the '05-'06 school year to requiring a minimum of two years postsecondary schooling and passing an evaluation of ability and knowledge (Klein, 2015).

The NCLB left many people, especially educators, unhappy and has raised a large amount of criticism over the years. The 100 percent proficiency rating the law required was statistically impossible to reach, with failure to meet standards resulting in budget cuts and increased teacher turnover. As stated in Ravitch's *Reign of Error* (2014), "it was as though Congress had passed a law saying that every school in American should be crime free (p. 12);" a goal that nobody could truly dislike, but not something that can be truly enforced. Other criticisms involved the increased involvement of private corporations in education, in the form of charter schools. The NCLB made many provisions favorable to charter schools, with some lawmakers believing them to possibly be preferable alternatives to public schools. Even more people were upset over the increasing amount of standardized testing being done. While the NCLB only required testing in grades 3-8, many states began testing programs all the way back to prekindergarten and even more for high school students. The high school tests even

became a requirement for graduation in some states. Texas, for example, had fifteen different tests for students to pass before they could be considered for a high school diploma. All of these tests forced teachers to change their curricula in order to prepare their students to actually perform well on a test, giving rise to the phrase “teaching to test,” with more and more money being funneled into the testing programs and classes that the tests would be covering. This took away from other programs, causing both teachers and classes to be cut from the budget (Ravitch, 2014).

The goals set by the NCLB are also highly difficult to reach. In 2010, less than 40 percent of American schools were reaching AYP, with some states seeing failure rates up to 50 percent and sometimes even more. And with the highly divided Congress that year, little could be done to attempt to reform the bill, though many measures were brought to the table. To combat this, President Obama offered waivers to states that were failing to meet AYP, allowing the schools to not comply with NCLB requirements. Instead, schools would have to adhere to the Common Core standards or write up their own standards that the federal government considered rigorous enough. The tests that once adhered to NCLB standards had to be altered to better fit the new standards that would be enacted and new teacher evaluations had to be put in place to better track both student progress and teacher capability (Klein, 2015).

Introduced in 2010 by the current administration, the Common Core State Standards are designed with the intention of providing clearer goals for students, with the intention of preparing them for their futures in postsecondary education, careers, and life in general. As a whole, they are meant to be representative of what students are expected to know as they leave each consecutive grade level. This is intended to make curricula

easier to design and easier for the teachers and parents to keep the students on track. The standards, which remain uniform for all states that choose to adhere to them, are based on international models of education, as well as including research from various individuals, agencies, and institutions across the nation. Similar to the NCLB standards, the Common Core focuses mainly on English-language arts and mathematics, with demographic groups separated by grade levels: K-8, 9-10, and 11-12. While the standards set goals for each grade, they are flexible enough to allow for teachers to decide on how to get students to reach those goals and what study materials the students can use. At the same time, the standards make provisions for students with special needs and those currently learning the English language, though it is up to the states to properly enforce those provisions (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015a).

While the standards in their entirety are too encompassing to cover in this text, some summarizations can be made over the basic content for each field of study. In terms of the reading standards, teachers have to look at what the students are reading and how well they can interpret and understand those readings. As students advance in grade, their ability to gather more information, make fuller use of text, and understand themes should steadily rise. Students should be able to utilize wide varieties of sources, make increasing numbers of connections, and pick out greater amounts of mistakes and inconsistencies. With the writing standards, the government makes an attempt to separate the everyday skills of writing (planning, revisions, publishing, etc.) from more specific types of writing, such as debate, narration, and information. The writing standards also include proper uses and sources of research and the importance of connecting the reading and writing skills. Speaking and listening standards cover formal presentations, as well

as interpersonal skills and cooperation. At the same time, they try to get students to develop their ability to use both sight and sound in order to both present and absorb information. The language standards focus on the proper uses of grammar and the English language, with students understanding how to speak both plainly and academically, make connections between different phrases, and attain new vocabulary (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015b).

Just as there are set standards for the students, there are also standards set up within the American education system for the teachers, in the form of a code of ethics and the state qualifications for hiring one as an educator. The code of ethics for educators, as set by the Association of American Educators, consists of four basic principles that state the rights of students and educators in America. The first principle deals with a teacher's conduct toward students, with educators being obliged to aid in the growth of students as model US citizens by imparting certain values, such as cooperation, integrity, and responsibility. Educators have to be considerate and fair with the students and treat them with respect. Teachers can be held in confidence by students, not revealing certain information concerning student's permission unless circumstances call for it. Educators must make efforts to keep the learning environment conducive to the student's learning, safety, and health, and must leave personal bias and disinformation out of the classroom. The second principle deals with the educator's conduct towards his/her practices and performance, as the teacher must be responsible for his/her performance and integrity. This involves making sure the educator accepts positions on the basis of personal qualifications, maintaining his/her competency in his/her field of education and his/her health (both mental and physical), complying with the law and

policies of the school, and not misusing school materials for personal reasons. With the third principle, the focus shifts towards behavior with professional colleagues. Educators are expected to keep confidential information about colleagues confidential, never misrepresent their colleagues or the school system, and protect colleagues from pressure that would violate their professional principles. In the fourth and final principle, conduct towards parents and teachers are discussed. Teachers are expected to seek communication with the parents and ensure the parents are kept up to date on what is expected of the students. Educators are also expected to make attempts to properly understand the cultures of their charges and families, in order to respect any values that may conflict with classroom policy or curricula (Association of American Educators, 2015). While a code of ethics is all well and good, it can be difficult to enforce at times.

Standards for hiring teachers in the US can vary widely depending on where one lives. Different states have differing requirements; sometimes reflecting the general political views of the region the state is located in. In general, teachers are required to have at least a bachelor's degree, have completed a teacher preparation program at any sort of postsecondary level, and be certified by the state/nation. States will usually conduct criminal background and citizenship checks on applicants looking to be licensed as teachers and many require a passing grade on a certification exam, like the Praxis, and content-related exams. On top of all of that, some experience in a classroom is expected, usually in the form of a mentorship or student teaching (Teaching License and Certification, 2014).

The American Education system has a wide variety of strengths and weaknesses. It is incredibly diverse and allows for a wide range of choices for grade schools,

postsecondary institutions, and career paths. Many schools offer a wide variety of after-school programs and serve as centers for activities and events within their communities. On the other hand, the system is relying more and more on standardized testing as a basis for educational success. Teacher qualifications can be very lax depending on where one lives in the states. A relatively small portion of federal funding goes to schools and what is distributed is done so in a detrimental manner, either through cutting funding from the schools that report lower than desired scores or by giving out a select amount of funds to a select few schools that reach a certain benchmark by certain periods. Many of the major policies that have been put into place in recent years have been enacted with the best of intentions, but with little empirical research to support the measures used. In times such as these, it sometimes does well to look toward other nations and how they educate their citizens. Thailand serves as the first example, being a nation vastly different from America and serving as a foil for some of the nations regarded as among the better educated in the world.

Thai Education

Thailand is a Southeast Asian nation with a rich religious and cultural history that remained relatively untouched during the imperial years of many European nations as a neutral colony. This gives it a somewhat unique system of government that shares only a few similarities with other like systems around the world. In turn, this paves the way for a different system of education than other nations we will be taking a look at, which have a basis in the British system of education. Currently, the Thai government is run as a monarchy with a bicameral parliament acting as the major legislative body of the nation. As recent as 2014, a number of protests and coups have taken place within Thailand's

borders, leading to a great deal of unrest and uncertainty within the Thai government. This has led to something of a backlog in the movement and enforcement of legislation across the nation, which has prevented any sort of education reforms being passed. Combined with an ever-increasing budget, this opens the door for a number of problems for education in Thailand (Clark, 2014a).

All Thai citizens are required to spend at least 9 years within the education system, learning English as a second language with they begin their fifth year of schooling. More and more within the nation, schools are requiring mandatory English lessons at least once a week. The typical school year begins in May and ends in March the next year, with universities beginning their years in June and ending in March. The grades are separated on into primary (1-6), lower secondary (7-9), and upper secondary (10-12), with all twelve years of schooling free for citizens. Only about half of the Thai population makes it to the tertiary (postsecondary) schools, with about two-thirds of that number graduating. While Thailand does have private schooling available, only about 16 percent of the population attending school chooses to go to privately owned institutions. In order to pay for all of this, about 22-23 percent of the Thai national budget goes into education, one of the higher percentages of its category on both a global average and a regional scale. What that national budget doesn't cover, it is provided by tuitions, donations, and loans from banks. Similarly to the United States, Thailand has three general tiers to its Ministry of Education: national, regional, and local. The regional level divides the 76 provinces of the country into twelve different areas, though Bangkok itself makes up a sort of 13th region of its own (Clark, 2014a).

While education is compulsory in Thailand, the nation has many rural areas and urban slums. This makes it difficult to get every child into a proper school, either due to a lack of resources in the area or a level of apathy towards the concept of schooling within those communities. Some within the Thai government have been attempting to make strides to relieving this somewhat. Lower secondary schools are being constructed in more rural areas and scholarships are being made available to girls within those areas as well, in an attempt to keep them out of Thai's sex industry. Secondary schools in Thailand have four basic elements to their curricula: core subjects (math, science, Thai, English), prescribed electives (curricula that changes depending on the schools region and demographics, i.e. Islamic studies for southern Thailand), free electives (chosen by the students) and activities (extra-curriculars). In addition to the public system, Thailand's private schools, though few in number are subject to heavy government oversight, yet the students on average tend to do better than those in the public system (International Council for Open and Distance Education).

Once they leave secondary school, students seeking to enter a public university will have to pass a standardized national university entrance exam, which tends to favor those that come from a middle class family or higher, or come from one of the better secondary schools in the urban areas. To combat that sort of inequality, universities set quotas for their respective regions in order to ensure enough applicants actually make it into the schools. In the past few decades, Thailand has attempted to make a few reforms of their higher education systems. One such reform was granting a small number of universities almost universal autonomy. While these schools still receive grant money from the government, the decisions regarding academic policies, resource management,

and personnel are left entirely to the institutions, though the majority is still subject to strict government oversight. Many of the reforms are based off of a recent 15-year plan, which aims to restructure Thai tertiary education. Part of this would involve dividing Thai universities into four distinct categories, with each category having its own goals, policies, and standards: community colleges, liberal arts universities, specialized universities, and research/graduate universities (International Council for Open and Distance Education).

Standards for teachers are set forth by the Teacher's Council of Thailand, which are divided into subsets regarding professional knowledge/experience, performance, and professional, personal, client-centered, collegial, and societal ethics. At the minimum, teachers are required to have a bachelor's degree in education from an accredited university. In addition, the teacher has to demonstrate knowledge in the following areas: curricula development, educational technology, classroom management, educational psychology, assessment and evaluation strategies, learning management, and other fields. With regards to experience, aspiring teachers have to complete a minimum of one year of practical training by either training in a professional school setting or taking training courses during study in university. Administrators are not exempt from standards as well, with their standards of knowledge and experience, though those cover a different set of skills and experiences. Administrators are required to have knowledge in educational policy and planning, management of finances, buildings, and administrations, quality assurance of education, and administration of public and community relations, in addition to prior experience with at least five years in teaching operations or two years experience in a lower administrative position along with some teaching operations experience.

Performance standards for teachers read more as guidelines, including such standards as: being committed to bringing students to their full potential, developing teaching plans for effective implementation, conducting themselves as good role models, cooperate with others within the educational institution and the community, and creating opportunities for students to learn in any circumstance (Teachers Council of Thailand, 2005).

Teachers are also held to a variety of ethics standards, having to adhere to Thailand's general professional ethics standards above all else, in addition to contributing to the integrity of the institution they are a part of and acting in a responsible manner. On a personal level, educators are expected to possess a good deal of self-discipline, along with keeping up with their chosen field of study and improving their practice. When interacting with students, Thai educators are expected to be attentive to the students' needs and to be fair when dealing with them in encouragement and punishment. They are also expected to actively encourage students in working towards their full potential both inside and outside of school. Thai educators are to be good role models, and should never act in such a way to harm the students' development physically, emotionally, socially, or intellectually. When asked to provide assistance or advice, educators are to do so honestly and not abuse their positions for their own interests. When dealing with colleagues, they are to support one another and keep each other on right track. Thai teachers are supposed to act as leaders within their communities, especially when it comes to matters of culture, history, and religion (Teachers Council of Thailand, 2005).

Though these standards may be in place, enforcing teachers to behave according to the standards is another matter entirely. Many schools in Thailand have large class sizes, sometimes exceeding 50 students in a classroom at a time. This places a large

burden on the teachers, who in turn have to cut corners to keep up with all of the students. Some teachers within Thailand refer to rules being changed every semester and new plans, policies, and curricula handed down by administrators. While the teachers are trying to keep up, many students will sleep through class and won't be caught doing so because of the size of the class. At the same time, Thailand is having troubles keeping and attracting western teachers, due to a policy of requiring western teachers to take a course in Thai culture. Teachers have to pay for that course out of their own pockets and no one is exempt, even if the teacher has lived in the country for many years. Many teachers are also subject to incredible amounts of oversight by Ministry of Education officials. Some English instructors have spoken of officials who chastise them because the students' grammar is not perfect, when those same officials have difficulty forming English sentences on their own (James, 2015).

Even though Thailand portions out a large section of its national budget to its education system, many schools are underfunded. Many classes have textbooks that are too few in number, outdated, or just lack textbooks altogether. Other schools possess little to no equipment or safety gear for the science classes. Going even further, many schools cannot afford to pay teachers much, with the average being \$750 a month. The problems with education are even affecting travel into the country. In order to better judge the quality of western teachers, Thailand has been putting restrictions on tourist visas. The rationale behind this revolves around the foreign teachers that cannot acquire work permits, forcing them to rely on tourist visas to remain in country. While the new rules make it more difficult to do so, it is not a foolproof system and tends to harm actual tourists more than the illegal workers (James, 2015).

Out in the rural areas of Thailand, the situations for schools can get even worse. One school located in a mountainous region about 900 km north of Bangkok has only two teachers on staff, with those teachers having to manage 45 different students at different primary school grades. That same school doesn't even have electricity, aside from a single solar cell to power the lights. Even worse, most of the students speak a regional dialect, while the teachers speak only the official language of Thailand. The situation is similar in many rural villages within Thailand. Other schools in these areas have large dropout and enrollment rates, constantly mixing up the classrooms and making it highly difficult for the few teachers available to keep up with the needs of all of these new students in so many different subjects. Some of the teachers in these areas mean well with their work though. They want to try and prepare the students for a potential life outside of the village, to keep the students out of the drug trade, and to improve their quality of life (UNESCO).

With Thailand, we have a system that means well, but is held back by problems within the greater system of government. While Thailand allocates a significant portion of its federal budget to education, it does not amount to much when one considers the value of the Thai baht. Recent upheavals in government have kept many education reforms from being enacted and what is passed tend to be shortsighted measures that seem to do more harm than good. The lack of funds has increased class sizes and left teachers overworked and underpaid. In rural areas, the situation is worse, with larger classes spanning multiple grade levels being watched over by only a few teachers in buildings that sometimes lack electricity. In contrast, Thailand's neighbor, Malaysia, has

made recent improvements in their own education system, in an attempt to better match the small nation of Singapore at the tip of the peninsula.

Malaysian Education

Malaysia is something of a melting pot of the Asia-Pacific belt, with a long coastline over two different landmasses, a long history as a central trading port for various cultures of Asia, and at one point a colony of the British empire. All of these factors have left their influence on Malaysian culture in general and in the way education is conducted within its borders. For the most part, Malaysian education is based off of the British system, a remnant of their colonial days. At a basic level, the British system focuses more on depth of knowledge rather than breadth when it comes to education, making sure the students deeply understand the material they cover in class, instead of possessing superficial information on a variety of subjects. This sort of approach can be difficult when working with students from a large variety of cultures and religions, as the material has to be modeled so as to not offend the beliefs and ways of the various people within the system.

In the public school system, all students are taught to speak Bahasa Melayu, Malaysia's national language. Such is the case in many non-English speaking nations, the English language is taught to most students as a second language and from the years 2003 to 2011, mathematics and science courses were taught using English instead of Bahasa. However, in schools where a majority of the students are of Chinese or Tamil descent, those students are taught their respective languages as their primary, with Bahasa relegated to a second language and English as a third. Once a student reaches the university level, he/she can expect to see more and more English being used as the

primary language of instruction, in order to better prepare them for interacting with the world at large (Clark, 2014b).

Schooling in Malaysia consists of four separate stages, each lasting a set amount of years. The first six years (primary school) are compulsory for all citizens, while the following five years are secondary education. The remaining two years are meant for preparing a student to move on to university life. The school year itself runs from January to November, with no large breaks in between. This typically changes once one enters higher education, where the year is broken up into semesters. Due to the compulsory nature of it, enrollment in primary school in Malaysia has stayed uniform for many decades, though there have been recent increases in secondary school enrollment. In a report from the World Bank, it was stated that what gaps existed within enrollment in Malaysia's education system were small, almost insignificant; when looking at the numbers for primary and lower-secondary schools, there was incredible equity between genders, ethnicities, economic status, and locales. The same could not be said once they began reaching upper-secondary and higher education, as those within the higher socio-economic groups were more likely to continue on with their education (Clark, 2014b).

Primary schooling is broken up into several different types of institutions, some of them familiar to the American system: national (public) schools, ethnic schools dealing with students from highly different cultures (i.e. Tamil and Chinese), private institutions, and international schools. Every one of these types of schools follows the Malaysian National Curriculum, a standard curriculum covering a primary language, English as a second language, math, science, physical and health education, the arts, civics, local studies, and Islamic studies, which are required for all Muslim students. This will

continue on for six years; once the end of the sixth year is reached, students take an exam known as the Primary School Advancement Test. This exam, similar to many standardized tests in the states, follows the more quantifiable subjects, testing students in their comprehension of their first language and English, mathematics, and science. Those who pass the exam are automatically allowed to continue on to lower-secondary school. From here, school is no longer compulsory, though close to 99 percent of students in Malaysia continue on at this point. Lasting three years, students have to attend at a national school to continue their education. If a student is coming in from a Tamil or Chinese school, they will take a year in a transitional course, to improve their Bahasa. At a minimum, students will take courses in eight different subjects. As a requirement, they must take courses in Bahasa, English, geography, science, math, and history. From there, they have a choice of electives, from Islamic studies, to moral education, and even life skills. At the end of this cycle, they will take another exam, referred to as the PMR or the Lower Secondary Assessment. Each student is tested in seven to nine subjects and must pass all of the taken assessments to move on to upper secondary school. Depending on their performance, they are recommended to certain schools and academic tracks depending on their choice of subjects (Clark, 2014b).

At upper secondary school, student must choose between one of three types of institutions: academics (arts and sciences), technical/vocational, or religious. Regardless of the choice, they are required to continue taking courses in Bahasa, English, Islamic/moral studies, history, and math. In the academic institutions, students are broken into the science stream and the arts stream. Those in the science stream must take courses in biology, chemistry, physics, and advanced math, while those in the arts stream

must take an integrated science course and other non-science electives. In the technical streams, courses and curricula are more geared towards giving students skills of a more practical nature, with courses in mechanical, civil, and electric engineering, agriculture and food studies, fashion, and commerce. Students in the vocational streams typically are taught in the fields of catering, automotive repair, electrics, and computer programming. In addition, students in the technical/vocational streams can qualify to take an exam that can act in a role similar to a college degree, giving them a better chance at a management position in the future. Once they finish schooling in this area, students are eligible to take the SPM or Open Certification Exam, which qualifies them to continue on to pre-university studies or private colleges (Clark, 2014b).

Past the upper secondary level are the senior secondary studies. The senior secondary studies are separated into two categories: pre-university and matriculation. Pre-university lasts for two years and is offered at both secondary schools and colleges across Malaysia. Students entering pre-university are separated into science and humanities streams, taking general studies courses and a few other electives at the same time. At the end of that second year, another exam is administered, with students only required to pass at least one subject to continue into higher education. In matriculation, students only take courses for a year and typically expected to enter into the more prestigious universities in the nation. Matriculation has three streams within it: science, accounting, and technical. In addition, matriculation requires students to take a wide variety of compulsory studies. Those that get past the senior secondary levels finally move on to higher education. Higher education in Malaysia is similar in construction to American higher education, with similar amounts of credits needed in order to receive

certain degrees (i.e. 120 credits for a bachelor's degree). In recent years, Malaysia has been attempting to get its universities to focus more on the research aspects of their facilities. This kind of focus has increased the number of Malaysian students receiving Ph.D.'s by tenfold (Clark, 2014b).

The improvement of teaching standards within Malaysia has become increasingly important since 2009, in part due to a major series of reforms the nation's education is undergoing at the moment. On a conceptual level, Malaysian standards are based on the assumption that by improving the competence of teachers, it will increase levels of achievement in education and other fields. This sort of policy is the first of its kind in Southeast Asia, judging teachers based on their competency, and has led to increased amounts of teacher education programs within the nation's own schools. It is a similar system to our own currently, judging teacher competency on the basis of student test scores, which can be hit or miss depending on how the tests are administered and what the tests are truly meant to judge. Developing the standards in the first place revealed some underlying deficiencies in some of the areas teachers were expected to be knowledgeable in, such as classroom management and even content-relevant skills. This was partly attributed to the previous standards by which Malaysian teachers were judged, which followed a few misconceptions that seemed to do more harm than good. The changes made to the standards in 2009 were made with the intention of aiding in improving Malaysia's economy from the bottom up, improving teachers to improve students to improve society as a whole (Abdullah, 2014).

In practice, the Malaysian Teacher Standards (MTS) are meant to work as a guideline to measure the achievements of teachers. They are set as the goal and not the

bare minimum necessary to be considered competent. The actual requirements of teachers in the nation are set forth by the relevant agencies and teaching institutions in their respective provinces. The MTS can serve many functions depending on the observer. For the government, they are the benchmark for improving teachers. For teachers, they are how one evaluates one's own abilities. Teacher educators use the MTS to determine the effectiveness and strategies of their own curricula. Administrators use the standards to better judge the effectiveness of their school as a whole (Abdullah, 2014).

When the government set out to build the MTS, they had to look at a variety of different factors and variables. They began with a national mission, which was defined as raising the country's capability for knowledge and instilling first-world mindsets. From there, a national philosophy for education was developed; this concept revolved around a belief in producing balanced individuals on an intellectual, physical, spiritual, and emotional level. These individuals had to have a level of knowledge and competency, while being morally upright, responsible, and able to make positive contributions to society. The philosophy of teacher education came next, stating:

“A teacher is noble in character, progressive and scientific in outlook, committed to uphold the aspirations of the nation, and cherishes the natural cultural heritage, ensures the development of the individual and the preservation of a united, democratic, progressive and disciplined society.” (Abdullah, 2014, p. 4)

Once a framework was made for determining the MTS, the actual concepts making up the MTS were separated into two components: content standards and professional requirements. The content standards themselves have three main branches: professional values within the profession, knowledge and understanding of the content,

curricula, and education theory, and skills in pedagogical careers. Going any deeper, those content standards can range from having three to eight different fields which specify the content teachers need to know that rest outside of their chosen field. The professional requirements on the other hand are more what institutions and agencies involved in teacher training should have implemented in order to aid education students in reaching the level of competency needed to properly function in the field. These requirements include: qualifications for accepting education students into the teacher training programs, training, evaluation, and assessment strategies, collaboration with students, schools, and government agencies, proper infrastructure and infostructure to support the trainees' knowledge base, and quality assurance to provide insight on any sort of corrections the program may require (Abdullah, 2014).

The reforms to the Malaysian teacher standards stems from a larger series of reforms to Malaysia's overall system of education. These reforms are referred to as the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025; beginning its inception in 2011, the blueprint was devised by Malaysia's Ministry of Education with the intent of preparing Malaysian students for life in the 21st century, soothing the concerns of the public and parents regarding public education, and better allowing Malaysia to compete on an international level where education is concerned. It took over a year and input from multiple, highly regarded sources both internationally and domestically, as well as input from parents, teachers, and administrators, before a completed version of the blueprint was released to the public. By comparing Malaysia's current educational situation with the standards of the past and current international standards, the blueprint offers 11 shifts in the strategies

and operations of the Malaysian education system to better provide students the education they deserve (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

The first shift involves providing equal access to education that meets an international standard. Part of this involves setting benchmarks for language, mathematics, and science skills, with the benchmarks set to reach those found in other high-performing nations around the world. Changes to secondary level curricula are to be made as well, providing a mixture of content knowledge and higher-order thinking skills, such as critical thinking, leadership, and problem solving; part of this will involve altering the structure of tests, focusing less on recalling and more so on applying knowledge to different settings. At the same time, this shift would increase access to existing education pathways, such as vocational schools, where the supply tends to be outstripped by the demand. Universal enrollment in preschool, combined with increasing the number and quality of such programs, would ensure that students receive proper developmental care during an important time in their lives, thus increasing their performance in future schools. Combined with increased funding to schools in general to provide better resources and properly trained teachers, along with moving from six to 11 years of compulsory education and retention programs to catch the students attempting to drop out, and already a lot can be done (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

The next shift is to ensure that every student is fluent in at least Bahasa and English, while encouraging education in a third language as well. New curricula will be established for this, some of it specifically targeting those who come from communities that don't speak Bahasa, as well as the establishment of remedial courses for those that require it. Increased screening will have to be done in order to properly judge the effects

of the curricula, in addition to making the English portion of their upper-secondary exams a compulsory pass if students wish to continue on in education. Other parts of the shift focus on teachers, with the standards for English teachers in Malaysia rising to requiring them to have passed the Cambridge Placement Test. Students will also be pushed to learn a third language as well. While equipping them with Bahasa will allow them to work in any major city in Malaysia and English will get them to many different places in the world, additional education in the languages that make up some of Malaysia's sub-populations, such as Tamil and Chinese, would allow the system as a whole to become increasingly flexible for students. In addition, increased emphasis would be put into education in other international languages, such as Spanish, Japanese, or French (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

The third shift involves developing "values-driven Malaysians." What this means is that Malaysian students should leave the education system with a strong connection to their culture and values that can be respected on a global field. Part of this involves improving Islamic and moral education, with a greater focus on unity and cooperation, as well as requiring community service from every primary and secondary school student at some point in their careers. Schools would also require students to participate in at least one sport, one club, and one uniformed body (official organization, such as guard cadets), making participation in such a requirement for graduation and scholarships. The intent is to develop the students' abilities and interests with a variety of activities. Working alongside this is the increased presence of activities that cross over to different school types, forcing students to interact with those of different backgrounds, interests, and abilities to solve problems and learn about the world at large. Combined, all of these

would work to instill strong values within a student and to instill a sense of identity within the student, as well as providing a direction for his/her life (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

The shifts keep piling on from there, including: increasing the number of quality teachers in the country, improving selection criteria for hiring school administrators and increasing their accountability, giving schools greater autonomy with regards to their programs and meeting the needs of their students, providing internet access to most public schools, increasing the size and capabilities of the Ministry of Education, making sure parents and communities are properly included in the students' education, and increasing transparency in order to ensure proper accountability for all involved with the schools. All of this is intended to be completed by the end of 2025 and is meant to be rolled out in three separate waves. The first wave (2013-2015) is the start-up and is focused on supporting teachers and building up the core curricula. This involves improving the current pool of available teachers, improving student literacy, and increasing student retention. When finished, the teachers, administrators, and students are expected to have met a minimum quality standard. The second wave (2016-2020) is the exponential phase, speeding up the development of the other areas. To achieve this, the ministry will be setting up new career packages for employees of the education system, restructuring the ministry itself, and revising the primary and secondary curricula to include skills necessary to compete in the economy of the 21st century. The third wave (2021-2025) builds up the flexibility of the new system and is meant to ensure its effectiveness for years to come. Schools will be given increased autonomy and are intended to manage themselves for the students' needs. This autonomy is also intended

to generate new forms of instruction, with schools sharing their strategies with their neighbors and so on. The new system is intended to be capable of changing on its own with time, so schools work together to keep up with the world (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

In the end, the new Malaysian system is intended to meet five qualities. Near universal enrollment in every grade level from preschool to upper secondary is to be found by 2020. While Malaysia does not expect itself to be the best, it does intend to stay within the top third of countries as far as international assessments are concerned. At the same time, they are looking at reducing the achievement gaps between rural-urban students, socio-economic groups, and genders by 50% by 2020. The system is looking to embrace diversity by updating its religious and moral education, to better give the children a sense of national identity, while keeping their own cultural heritage strong. And the new system is intended to be as efficient as possible, maximizing the outcomes of the students with the current and future budgets (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). It is highly ambitious, and while some of the goals seem a little too lofty, they are admirable and some are even highly sensible for the nation and may do well when applied to other nations. With Malaysia, we have an average system that is looking to become one of the best in its region and has a good chance at doing so, though they might overshoot their own deadline in the process.

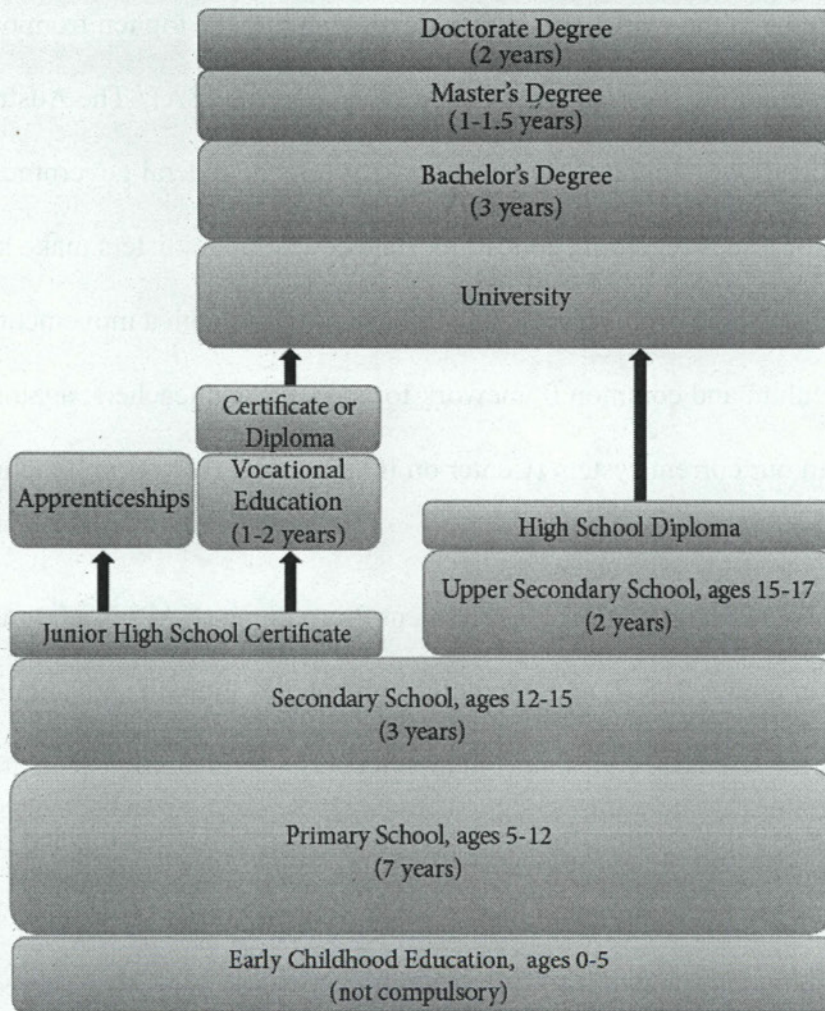
Australian Education

Like the Malaysian system, the Australian system of education can be traced back to its roots as an English colony. Up until the late 70's – early 80's, most of the influence on Australian policy came from the European immigrants. After a recession in that time

though, they began to look towards their local neighbors for possible guidance and ideas for both its economy and its schools. This has resulted in one of the more successful education systems in the world, sometimes ranking among the top ten from organizations such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The Australian system is a de-centralized one, similar to ours in a way. While the federal government has some say on the major issues regarding education, state education ministers make most of the policy decisions. Some of this has changed in recent years, with a movement towards a national curriculum and common framework for students and teachers; again, not too dissimilar from our current system (Center on International Education Benchmarking, 2009).

Australia's current National Assessment Programme (NAP) is administered to every student in grades 3, 5, 7, and 9 to judge competency in math and language skills, though exams for sciences, civics, information technology, and citizenship are administered every three years. Results are released for public viewing and publicly elected officials use the information to aid in determining curricula. If the country begins to lag behind in certain fields for PISA, focus shifts towards improving scores again. When math and reading dropped a few years ago, Australia's department of education pumped nearly \$67 billion into the school systems in the form of incentives for aiding the infrastructures of ailing schools and the educations of students that were performing the worst. This resulted in a series of reforms that included enhancing IT education, improving teacher education/retention, and restructuring vocational education. At the level of school systems though, Australia could resemble something akin to a

combination of the American and Malaysian system, as far as how a student would perceive it (Center on International Education Benchmarking, 2009).



A chart of the different levels within the Australian education system. Source: <http://www.ncee.org/programs-affiliates/center-on-international-education-benchmarking/top-performing-countries/australia-overview/>.

The system is broken into three tiers (primary, secondary, and tertiary) and is open to all citizens within the nation. Once a child reaches the age of five, education becomes compulsory and the child stays in the system until he/she reaches the age of 15/17, depending on the state one lives in. Public schooling is free, with the state and territorial government covering most of the costs. However, families still have to pay for

uniforms, books, and personal supplies out of their own pockets. Private schooling is available to those who so choose to take it, with most of the schools in that field run by the Catholic Church or an independent organization. Within the urban areas, one can find private schools for Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and other religions as well (Department of Social Services, 2014). While the public schools are subject to oversight and control from their state/territorial Ministry of Education, private schools operate under pre-arranged agreements with the government and may receive some funding from the federal and state/territorial government (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

For most children in Australia, primary schooling begins at the age of five and continues on for 7 years. During this time, students are instructed in eight different fields: English, health/physical education, foreign languages, science, mathematics, society, technology, and art. During this time, the small groups that make up early childhood education in the nation are melded together, with the intent of teaching the children how to cooperate with and respect their peers (Department of Social Services, 2014). At this stage, a single teacher runs each class, similar to our system. Students attend school usually from 9 am to 3 pm for five days a week, for 40 weeks a year. These 40 weeks are broken up into four approximately equal terms to cover the whole year. When students reach somewhere around the age of 12, they begin secondary school. Early secondary schooling in Australia focuses more on the core subjects (math, English, science), though there is some room for electives. It isn't until upper secondary school that students obtain more freedom to explore their career interests. At this point as well, the teachers become more specialized, with each student having a different teacher for each subject at this point (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Some students will opt to go for vocational education and training (VET) instead of upper secondary schooling though. VET is designed around building a strong workforce for the nation, with a focus on developing/refining skills useful in a professional workplace. VET programs are typically offered by smaller colleges and universities around Australia and can be run either privately or by the government. Private VET programs are more specialized, and are usually run out of training facilities, industrial associations, business colleges, and community centers. Public VET programs tend to be larger and broader in scope, capable of drawing in large crowds of students. Anyone of age can enter a VET school and learn a trade so long as they are willing. The main fields many of these students end up learning from include: commerce, engineering, sociology, and personal services, though education is considered a part of this sort of study as well. Some of these students end up moving on to apprenticeships, especially if they are learning a trade, such as engineering or architecture. Others go on to work-related training, which builds up skills while giving one real-world experience in something akin to a combination of a classroom and a business setting (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

With most of the major cities concentrated around the coastline, a large portion of the Australian continent is sparsely settled. This has led to the development of a few options for students in these rural, sometimes highly remote areas. In these situations, boarding schools are not uncommon, though there are more associated with private schools than government-run schools. Other schools are set up within proximity of local hostels, small houses where students can stay for free/on the cheap. Other rural communities rely on the staff of community centers to deliver education to the children;

this method of education distribution is utilized more so by Aboriginal tribes than Anglo settlers. With the development of the Internet, access to education has become even easier for rural students within the nation, though education of that sort typically does not provide the kind of immersion that a classroom can (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Standards for teaching in Australia are broken down into three categories: professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement. In professional knowledge, teachers have to possess in-depth knowledge of both their subject of study and their students. They have to understand the experiences in the classroom can affect a child's development and learning. They have to keep up to date with current knowledge in their field and understand how to utilize inquiry to get students to build their own knowledge frameworks, while employing a variety of learning strategies. Professional practice refers to making the learning process engaging and valuable to the student. The students have to want to learn before any true learning can begin. Teachers have to recognize any barriers the students may be facing and know how to break down those walls. Professional engagement centers on an effective teaching and learning style. Teachers have to understand how they themselves learn so that they may better expand on their professional knowledge and practice. Professional engagement also involves standards for interacting with colleagues, students, administrators, and parents (Australian Institute for Teaching and Leadership, 2011).

Where a teacher stands as far as these standards are concerned can be divided into four stages of professional development. Each of these stages are determined by benchmarks referring to the standards, with each stage having a higher standards of

knowledge, practice, and engagement than the previous. At the bottom, there are the graduate teachers, students that have only recently passed their qualification exam with an accredited teacher education program. Teacher at this stage meet what is considered the bare minimum in regards to the professional standards and content knowledge. They are capable of constructing lesson plans and assessments, and giving proper feedback to the students in a constructive manner. They also know how to rapport with the students and manage their behavior to a degree, while staying within the boundaries of professional ethics. Past that are the proficient teachers, who have demonstrated their achievement within the professional standards. Proficient teachers know how to relate their lessons to each student, having knowledge of each student's background in the process. They adjust the lessons to better suit a student's ethnicity, culture, and socio-economic status, while providing a positive learning environment. Proficient teachers are more capable of assessing and supporting a student's development, as well as using a variety of methods for learning and assessment. They also take the time to use a wide range of sources, such as parent-teacher conferences, student assessments, and state-recertification exams to better assess their own abilities and make adjustments as necessary. They are confident enough in their own capabilities to seek advice when necessary. Highly Accomplished teachers are the skilled practitioners, capable of teaching on their own and collaborating with other teachers for a more unified experience. They are expected to take on the roles of mentors, advisors, and leaders, aiding their colleagues in their own professional development. They are typically the ones who aid pre-service teachers just finishing up their own schooling. Highly Accomplished teachers have in-depth knowledge of their subjects and actively keep up

with the latest news concerning the subject, as well as new developments in the field of education. They know to keep the students' needs first, aligning their own goals to better keep up with the students. They also have to know how to effectively and communicate to groups and on an interpersonal level. Lead teachers are those who would go on to either train new generations of educators or become leaders in the world of Australian education. They work to improve the students' educational opportunities both inside and outside of the schoolyard. They can effectively communicate with and understand a wide range of students from differing cultures without hampering another student's education in the process. They work to improve methods of both student and teacher assessment and instruction by using information from a variety of sources. Lead teachers promote higher levels of thinking both within their colleagues and within their students (Australian Institute for Teaching and Leadership, 2011).

Evaluation and assessment of the various parts of the Australian system is broken down into four levels: National and systemic (states, territories, and non-government), school, teacher, and student. Student performance is assessed through a variety of measures, including standardized tests at the national and state level and the daily forms of assessment a teacher utilizes within the classroom. The standardized exams are used for both a diagnostic and measuring purpose. They measure the current capabilities of students and judge which subjects students seem to be performing poorly in on a system-wide level. Others assessments include the secondary education certification exams, which are required to be passed if one wishes to continue on in their education. Methods and procedures regarding teacher evaluation vary from state to state in Australia. A teacher has to be meeting assessment minimums if he/she wishes to be an accredited

educator by the country, be hired by schools, and have any chance at a promotion within the school. Evaluations of the schools tend to be done by the schools themselves and by external review boards. Schools are expected to take careful looks at their own records and determine if there are any problems and how they might go about fixing them.

System evaluations take into account the results of the Nationwide Assessment Program (NAP) and assessments done by the individual states and territories. Regardless of which level is being assessed, all levels have five basic requirements they have to use for distributing the results the assessments: national testing by the NAP, national reports published by the schools and systems, individual school information (locale, demographics, capacity, local economy) which can be compared to other schools, reports to parents made by the students, and annual reports published by schools regarding their basic information. All of this works together creating clear, well defined goals for Australian education, which has gathered a lot of support in recent years. At the same time, it helps to establish a framework for education, while also utilizing a large body of evidence for evaluating schools, teachers, and students, rather than relying on a singular source (Santiago, 2011).

As of this year, Australia has been attempting to work out a few reforms to its school system as well. One of these reforms includes the Students First package, which focuses on improving school autonomy, teacher quality, parent engagement, and the overall curriculum. This would involve a variety of changes and new factors to the current system, such as using the required reports and recommendations from teachers to make alterations to teacher education, granting the highest performing schools a degree of autonomy through the Independent Public Schools Initiative, and increasing the

number of opportunities to allow parents to become more involved in their child's educations. Other reforms include stronger support programs and larger appropriations for early childhood, special, and vocational education. The Australian government is also working on partnering with VET programs, universities, and the various other forms of tertiary education in the nation to better judge their own system and improve the quality of their workforce training programs, along with improving research centers, strengthening loan programs for students, and increasing the quality of VET programs within the country. All of these changes and many more are designed with the intent of keeping Australia among the best in the world with regards to education.

Potential Reforms

Through this study, we have observed three separate systems of education with differing structures, regulations, and standards. In Thailand, we observed a system that serves as more of a foil to our own; a possible outcome to our increasingly rigid system stuck in its current ways. With Malaysia, we observed a system that is taking steps to mark itself as one of the best systems in its region, as well as one of the better systems in the world. In Australia, we observed a system that shares many similarities with our own in some ways, yet differs in the approach, taking a more flexible path towards becoming one of the best education systems in the world. Each system has its own strengths and weaknesses and each continually looks to improve its own standing among its peers. Many of them have looked towards other countries, such as the United States, to improve their own methods of teaching creative thinking, debate, and problem solving to the next generation. At the same time, many of those with the influence to affect educational policy in America have attempted to look at nations such as China to improve test scores

in our schools. It is not unusual, when one is experiencing hard times, to look at one's neighbors and question what they are doing right.

When making attempts to reform any part of a system of government, the first questions are usually how much will the changes cost and how much can we reduce that cost? For us in the US, we spend around 12-14 percent of the annual national budget on education. Most of the actual finances for education come from local and state property taxes, which change proportionately with the economic status of the local community. Schools in lower income areas tend to be of a lower quality than schools in middle/upper class suburbs. This contributes to an achievement gap that has been present in American education for years, making it difficult to improve the schools suffering from it. Potential reforms on the economic side of the education would involve altering national and state budgets to devote greater resources to education unconditionally, while at the same time altering our somewhat unusual method of funding education. Two of the countries previously discussed, Malaysia and Thailand, devote a much larger proportion of their national budget, averaging out at around 20 percent (The World Bank, 2014). While that may not be much in Thai Baht, it still shows something of a greater commitment to funding education in a third world country than in one of the most advanced countries in the world. With America's own large budget, a simple shift of 5 percent of our resources could do incredible work with our system. An alternative to that would be allocating more resources to social programs for the impoverished, improving programs to ensure children in poor families are properly fed and clothed. Simple acts such as those can greatly boost a child's academic progress (Ravitch, 2014).

As for altering the funding of education itself, it starts by removing the funding's tether to property taxes. Instead, we might move to a system similar to Australia's. Australia utilizes a system revolving around Specific Purpose Payments (SPPs), which are equivalent to government grants directed towards certain essential services. Funding in Australian public education begins with a single SPP with a value determined by enrollment numbers in primary and secondary school. A number of other SPPs are then enacted, with the intent of funding capital grants, certain programs, and Aboriginal education. Along with that, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has built a series of "National Partnerships," groups formed by the COAG to provide funding for specific end goals within the education system, such as improving digital literacy, improving schools in lower socio-economic areas, and providing something of safety cushions for at-risk Australian youths (Harrington, 2011). The end result of these changes would be a more centralized education system, with a more balanced method of funding and binding partnerships with non-for-profits and other government departments to improve the factors outside of schools that affect a child's educational potential.

How we as Americans judge and rate our teachers has been criticized in recent years as well. Many states use the results from standardized tests to judge the performance of both teachers and schools. If students are performing below expectations, then the teachers deemed responsible run the risk of being let go; if the problem persists, the school's principal or even half of the teaching staff may be replaced. If it appears as though the staff cycling has not worked, then the school runs the risk of being shut down. All of those potential outcomes rise from the results of tests meant to judge the performance of students, not the capabilities of the teachers. This has led to a growing

trend where American educators are “teaching to the test,” in which education focuses mainly on mathematics and reading, along with skills related to increasing the outcomes of standardized tests. This focus has been to the detriment to many other subjects within schools, such as the sciences, social studies, and the arts, which are not covered in state standardized tests. At the same time, this system has led to a high rate of teacher turnover for many schools, decreasing numbers of students going into the education field, and decreasing morale within the profession as a whole. Students are seeing education as an undesirable profession, because of the restrictive standards by which teachers are judged and students are taught in. Many of those who do go into the field are staying in for only a few years, and those numbers seem to be slowly increasing (Ravitch, 2014).

While it is not an illogical leap to use student scores to evaluate the skills of a teacher, there have to be more factors taken into account. For example, Australian educators take it upon themselves to evaluate and judge the fitness of their peers. School systems handle teacher evaluations internally, with yearly appraisals for each employee. However, rather than using the appraisals to determine which teachers need to be fired, they act as a form of performance management. The appraisals judge a variety of criteria fitting within the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, as well as drawing on frameworks for education within the individual school systems. The evaluations themselves involve a variety of techniques, including first-person observations, reflections written by the teachers being evaluated, peer review, assessment panels, notes from mentors and coaches, the teachers’ portfolios, and student results. This multi-layered framework would help to determine whether a teacher might need assistance in building up content knowledge, classroom management skills, lesson planning, or any of

a variety of necessary skills and knowledge required to properly run a classroom (Australian Institute for Teaching and Leadership, 2011). At the same time, this same framework that is used to evaluate teachers can be used to determine which teachers may deserve certain benefits such as higher levels of accreditation in Australia, or tenure and bonuses in the USA. With few criteria being judged for evaluations, a system is more liable to let potentially good teachers fall out of the teaching profession, which is currently shrinking in America. By adding more criteria with differing standards for each layer, the system is more likely to retain the great teachers and those with the potential to become great teachers, while at the same time improving teacher morale and allowing teachers to focus on more than just testing.

Another field we can look towards improving is vocational education. Both Malaysia and Australia incorporate VET programs into their national systems of education, focusing on giving students the skills necessary to find a worthwhile career in life. In America, much of the education system is centered on preparing students to move on towards college and obtaining a bachelor's degree at the least. However, not every student is mentally or emotionally prepared/mature enough to attend college. Some end up going earlier than they should and drop out as a result. Others simply have no desire to attend a university. Increasing the quality and quantity of VET programs across the country provides more alternatives to students graduating from high school. Instead of attending a four-year university to obtain a degree, they can spend a couple of years getting certified in a variety of skill-based professions, such as auto/electrical repair, marketing, information technologies, culinary arts, and agricultural studies. Many of the careers that VET programs prepare students for may not pay as much as other that require

a degree, but they can support a person or even a family if one has both the luck and the skill. Just as well, these careers are just as important as the ones that only a college graduate can obtain. They may not be as glamorous as others, but they all provide essential services that keep America running. By increasing enrollment in VET programs, the country can increase the overall skill of the workforce, add a few new jobs to the market by providing staff to man these new VET schools, and provide something of a safety net for the students that don't want to continue on to college.

Some of the shifts that make up the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 would also work well as reforms and shifts in American education policy. For example, the sixth shift focuses on granting many schools the autonomy and financial support they need to succeed in and improve on education within their own districts. In Malaysia, part of this involves granting the district education offices the funding and political support to draft individual support programs for each school with their respective jurisdictions. The programs drafted by the offices can be designed to improve a variety of areas, such as student attendance and resource allocation. Similar steps can be taken with district, city, and county school boards and education departments here in the states. While the local and state level departments can draft the support programs, they will still be required to comply with federal standards and priorities. Other parts of the shift involve granting schools greater operational control over budgets, resource management, and curricula design, while placing greater levels of accountability on school administrators. This autonomy is to be granted in a series of waves, starting with the highest performing schools and trickling downwards over time based on each school's performance. At the same time, each school is expected to meet infrastructure standards by a set deadline.

While that is not as much of a problem in the US as it is in Malaysia, many schools in the lower class communities have facilities in need of dire repair, along with replacement of vital resources, such as gym equipment, information technology, and up-to-date textbooks. By providing all public schools with the proper amount of funding, it is possible to bring most, if not all government run schools up to meeting a basic level of infrastructure and standards. Rules and guidelines would have to be set in place in order to properly decide how funds are distributed, but what is distributed should match the respective needs of each school to meet the standards set. Schools in wealthier communities will not need as much aid, while the poorer schools will require a crutch for a while, in order to catch up with the others. Once all schools meet the basic infrastructure and student achievement standards, the government can begin working on improving infrastructure and achievement as a whole (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

The ninth shift provided by the Blueprint also has some potential within American education. This shift centers on building up the public education system's rapport with parents, communities, and the private sector to better provide for the students. Schools are not the only location for education to take place in, with Malaysian students spending about a quarter of their time in school, from around the ages of seven to 17. Considering American school days are slightly longer than Malaysian days and the longer breaks for summer and winter, it is not unreasonable to think of American students spending a similar amount of time in school. As such, engaging citizens outside of the schools in the student's education ensures that learning is a more consistent process than it would be otherwise. Part of this involves equipping parents with the right knowledge and

connections to better understand what their children are learning and how they can help both inside and outside of the classroom. This could include regularly scheduled meetings with teachers to discuss their child's performance and what they can do at home to encourage and improve the child and online services that allow parents access to their children's progress on state and national assessments, as well as services for less able parents regarding their own literacy, information technology skills, and general parenting skills (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

In addition, working alongside the private sector within America may hold some benefits as well. This is disregarding charter schools in their current state or other forms of private schooling however. The Malaysian government intends to partner with NGOs and private businesses to sponsor schools in need of assistance financially, as well as allowing these groups to establish schools with the intent of focusing on certain groups within their nation, such as cultural minorities, rural schools, and schools for the mentally and physically challenged (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013). Implementing this sort of policy in America would be difficult in today's political climate. Private education is gaining increasing levels of support in state legislatures and Congress. With this support, charter schools, originally meant to take on the students that public schools had difficulty handling (the troublemakers, lower income students, disabled students, and ESL learners), charter schools have increasingly used their lack of restrictions to gather up the students that tend to test the highest, leaving the difficult students for the public schools and bringing that system's average scores down as a result. Charter schools were meant to serve as laboratories for education, taking the students that were most difficult to teach and finding strategies that could serve public schools well in the future. If we

can get a majority of charter schools back on that initial path, public school scores will increase and more of the difficult students will have the facilities available to give them an education that works (Ravitch, 2014).

Another shift that would work well in American education is the fourth, centering on improving teacher quality and making into a profession of choice. A good teacher goes a long way in a student's education. As the standards become stricter and stories and rumors of mass firings and low salaries pile up, fewer and fewer students in America are attempting to become teachers. Many of those that do become teachers end up leaving within the first two years of the job. And as teacher shortages appear, standards for hiring teachers go down, in order to try and make up for the losses. This results in people being hired that lack many of the proper qualifications, some of whom have to learn the material as they teach it. In order to alleviate this, a few changes have to be made. It starts with increasing teacher retention as a whole, in part by altering how teachers are assessed, as was mentioned previously. Altering how teacher assessment is done will allow more quality teachers to be kept on staff and will aid in identifying which need support to better succeed in their jobs. Individualized programs developed by supervisors and administrators will aid new teachers as they enter the profession, as it is the newest teachers that have the hardest time with the job. Increased amount of school-based training during a teaching student's time in higher education would help to better settle them into the job. Peer networks can be developed that don't have to involve unions, being more along the lines of teaching coaches, administrators, and senior teachers working to spread philosophies and strategies that seem to work well within their own schools. A network of teachers all supporting and teaching one another serves

to better give teachers both old and new a series of fresh ideas and strategies to meet their own standards. In addition, creating pathways for the advancement of certain teachers into positions of respect and leadership would ensure that there are some who are better able to pass on their knowledge as professors and subject specialists or go into politics to serve education on a state or federal level (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2013).

However, no matter which country we attempt to take ideas from, many of the problems boil down to two root causes: an imbalanced system of funding for education and an increasing trend of blaming teachers and administrators for the failings of the system. Many of the problems and potential solutions mentioned previously will not be nearly as effective unless the attitudes of many within the federal government are changed. While there are certainly bad teachers out there, there are too many good teachers that fall through the cracks in the system. While it is a nice sentiment to believe that every student has the ability to succeed and be proficient in the skills we are currently testing them in, not every student has equal capabilities in the classroom, nor does every student have the desire to succeed in the classroom. Many of them are disadvantaged from the start and have great difficulty in keeping up with those not faced with such challenges. And even if they can keep up, some of the proficiency standards are still near impossible to reach without fudging a few numbers. Recognizing this problem on a federal level is the first step among many others to rectifying the problems that hold back education in America.

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